

Susanne Walter

Invited but not (always) willing to go

Refugees in Tham Hin camp (Thailand) as an example of migration theories shortcomings

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Abstract

Since Ravenstein's "Laws of Migration", migration research and theories have developed significantly to look at migration from a variety of angles. My research question centers on the hypothesis that, despite these developments, social factors are still underrepresented in much of migration research and mostly assumed to be merely "side-players" in a community's or individual's decision whether to migrate. If they are taken into account at all, it is primarily in the study of transnational family networks, or integration processes in the destination country. The here presented case study of Tham Hin, one of the current nine Burmese refugee camps in Thailand, is an example of the importance of including social conditions in the home community as well. I discuss various migration models to support my hypothesis. Further, I outline the context in which the empirical example is situated, meaning the political situation of refugees in Thailand and their position therein. The plight of the Hmong refugees in Thailand at the end of the Indochina war is also contrasted with the current situation of Burmese refugees, situations that resemble each other in some ways but at the same time differ significantly in others, especially in regard to resettlement.

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Abbreviations

CCSDPT	Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KNU	Karen National Union
OPE	Overseas Processing Entity
PAB	Provincial Administration Board
RTG	Royal Thai Government
RSC	Resettlement Support Center
RST	Resettlement
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
TBBC	Thai Burma Border Consortium
THI	Tham Hin camp
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees

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1. Introduction

Case Study: A 44 year old married woman with six children has not considered resettlement. She prefers to remain in the camp and see if the situation in Myanmar, where her father siblings still live, will improve.¹

Even in the most basic theories about migration, there is an inherent assumption that people in the “Global South” are eager to move at the first opportunity, and that this decision is foremost a “rational choice” decision, depending in the largest part on economic considerations. This assumption, which applies to economic migrants moving from the periphery to the central developed states, is even more assumed for refugees, considering their often precarious, inhumane living conditions, in crowded camps with little possibilities for any improvements. It seems only natural, therefore, to assume that these groups of the most vulnerable would be eager to move at the first opportunity offered, even at the cost of making large sacrifices in order to become one of the “lucky few” able to move on. In regard to refugee situations, foremost in Africa, this seemed unfortunately to be confirmed in scandals involving UNHCR staff with taking bribes for resettlement placements.²

Over the years, we have seen not much of this assumption change, and the picture of “Europe as the El Dorado of the welfare state”, beleaguered by the less-fortunate of the developing world” is ever-dominant – from a European perspective, there is a long list for “them” to come to “us”.

Against this hype, however, the reality looks much different. Indeed, only a very small minority of migrants and refugees are actually arriving in “the West”, or even trying to get there – the majority of both groups only move to neighboring countries, which are often as poor as their home region. Indeed, only a small proportion of any

¹ Smith/UNHCR 2010:1; exemplary case study from Tham Hin survey, see chapter 6.

² As allegedly happened in UNHCR Nairobi, Kenya (cf. Frederiksson 2002:3).